

## **An environmental mantra? Ecological interest in Romans 8.19-23 and a modest proposal for its narrative interpretation\***

### **Introduction**

Those of us coming to work on Paul's Letter to the Romans must expect to confront a very muddled field, so many are the feet, some of them highly distinguished, which have trodden the ground before us. For those of us interested in the use of the biblical texts within environmental ethics, Rom. 8:19-23 is a particularly muddy watering hole. Many have paused here for a brief sip to take encouragement from Paul's apparent reference to a positive destiny for non-human creation, alongside the children of God (v. 21); indeed, as John Bolt notes, the text seems to have become 'little more than a mantra for Christian environmentalism'.<sup>1</sup> While there are detailed exegetical treatments of this text available, most ecotheological appeals to the text are rather brief, and take little account of the details and difficulties of the passage. This paper, then, seeks to chart the emergence of environmentally-oriented readings of these verses and, by employing a narrative approach, to explore in some detail the story of creation – non-human and human – that underpins this short and enigmatic passage in Paul's most influential letter. We hope that this may offer a strategy which takes us beyond superficial appeals to this text as a kind of ecological proof-text, and a route by which to consider the part it may play in the articulation of an ecological theology.

### **The emergence of an ecological reading of this text**

---

\* The research presented in this paper is part of a project on 'Uses of the Bible in Environmental Ethics', funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (Grant No. AH D001188/1; see <http://www.huss.ex.ac.uk/theology/research/ubee.htm>). We would like to express our thanks for the AHRC's support. The paper was first presented to the Paul Seminar at the British New Testament Conference, Sept 2007. We are grateful to all those who offered questions and comments, which have helped in the reshaping of the paper for publication.

<sup>1</sup> John Bolt, 'The Relation Between Creation and Redemption in Romans 8:18-27', *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995), pp. 34-51, at p. 34.

Despite evidence that some peoples of the ancient world experienced<sup>2</sup> and reflected upon<sup>3</sup> different forms of environmental degradation, no-one would pretend that such issues feature explicitly in Paul's writings, or even that the fate of nature, or the relationship between humanity and our planet's ecosystems, were major issues for Paul as they are in much contemporary debate. However, it would be wrong to assume that we are the first generation to find here a positive attitude toward non-human elements of creation and their eschatological fate. Indeed, there has been a range of interpretations of this passage throughout Christian history, of which we provide a few illustrative examples.

The subject of these verses, *kti/sij*, has been translated and understood in various ways. Whether translated 'creature' or 'creation', throughout the history of its interpretation some commentators have assumed that *kti/sij* refers to the created world at large, with or without some or all of humanity. This has led to expectations of a positive change to be wrought in the natural world at the eschaton. Thus, Irenaeus finds here a reference to the entire 'created order' (*Haer.* 5.32) which will 'be restored to its pristine state', a condition he sees characterised by super-fecundity (5.33); this will allow the fulfilment of prophecies in both the Hebrew scriptures and the sayings of Jesus, regarding inheritance of the land, the rewards of the Kingdom, and the characteristics of the new earth. Irenaeus even wonders, alluding to Isa. 11:7 and 65:25, 'what kind of grain must it be whose very straw is suitable food for lions?' (*Haer.* 5.36). Tertullian (*Herm.* 11) and, later, John Chrysostom (*Hom. Rom.* , 14) interpret the term in a similar fashion and also make connections with prophecies from Hebrew scriptures; Tertullian links this passage with Isa 11.6 in discussion of the eschaton, while Chrysostom claims that the prophesied 'perishing' of the heavens and earth in the Hebrew scriptures (Ps. 102:2-6; Isa. 51:6) is to be seen as a parallel process to that undergone by believers as the 'perishable nature puts on the

---

<sup>2</sup> B. Pyatt, G. Gilmore, J. Grattan, C. Hunt, and S. McLaren, 'An Imperial Legacy? An Exploration of the Environmental Impact of Ancient Metal Mining and Smelting in Southern Jordan', *Journal of Archaeological Science* 27 (2000), pp. 771-78.

<sup>3</sup> John Seymour, and Herbert Girardet, *Far from Paradise: The Story of Human Impact on the Environment* (London: Green Planet, 1990), pp. 45, 53.

imperishable' (1 Cor. 15:53).<sup>4</sup> Much later, Luther takes *kti/sij* to refer to created things which have been made subject to vanity in the form of 'man' and will be delivered when the 'old man [is] abolished'.<sup>5</sup> Calvin, seeking to encourage believers, reflects that 'even inanimate creatures – even trees and stones – conscious of the emptiness of their present existence, long for the final day of resurrection, to be released from emptiness with the children of God' (*Inst.* 3.1.5).<sup>6</sup> Later still, in a famous sermon, 'The General Deliverance', John Wesley is clear that *kti/sij* refers to all creatures, and writes of their paradisiacal state prior to the Fall of humanity. When humans made themselves incapable of transmitting the blessings of God, the flow of blessings stopped and every creature was subjected to vanity 'by the wise permission of God'.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, others differed from this line of interpretation. Because of his belief that souls might be present in other beings,<sup>8</sup> Origen thought that our passage in Romans might refer to things such as celestial bodies and angelic forces (*Princ.* 3.5.4. 116-122; *Comm. Rom.* 7.4). By contrast, Augustine saw *creatura* (the Vulgate's rendering of *kti/sij*) as referring to human spirit, soul and body (*Exp. prop. ex Ep. ad Rom.* 53; *Div. quæst.* 83.67; *Fid. et symb.* 10.23). In another permutation, Ambrose sees both humans and celestial bodies being subject to vanity (*Ep.* 34.4-9) but finds it possible that angels, and indeed every creature, even those free of the bondage to corruption, might groan on our behalf, although it remains unclear what might be included in this category (*Ep.* 34.10-11; 35.1-2). Aquinas follows Ambrose in referring to celestial bodies as the

---

<sup>4</sup> This interpretation of the subject of our passage has remained in Eastern Orthodox teaching and forms part of their contemporary perspective on human responsibility for creation (Michael Prokurat, 'Orthodox Perspectives on Creation', *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 33 [1989], pp. 331-49).

<sup>5</sup> Wilhelm Pauck, (ed.) *Luther: Lectures on Romans, Library of Christian Classics Vol XV* (trans. Wilhelm Pauck, London: SCM, 1961), pp. 237-9.

<sup>6</sup> John T. McNeill, (ed.) *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Vol. 1 (Books 1.i to 3.xix), *Library of Christian Classics Vol XX* (trans. Ford Lewis Battles, London: SCM, 1960), p. 717.

<sup>7</sup> Sermon 60 in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M.*, Vol. VI (London: John Mason, 3rd edn, 1829), p. 245.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars* (Oxford: OUP, 1994 [1991]), pp. 127, 147-8.

referent of *kti/sij* (*ST Suppl. III*, q. 91, a. 2, ad 6) and finds no grounds for expecting the renewal of animals, plants or minerals (*ST Suppl. III*, q. 91, a. 5).

This diversity of interpretation of *kti/sij* continued into modern scholarship in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. An apparent majority<sup>9</sup> prioritise, or restrict, the referent of *kti/sij* to what is sometimes infelicitously referred to as ‘sub-human’ creation.<sup>10</sup> However, others see it as more inclusive. Karl Barth thinks that Paul ‘included all creatures, even the non-human’ while Ernst Käsemann sees *kti/sij* embracing non-human creation together with non-Christians.<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, some restrict the term to saved humanity: J. Ramsey Michaels considers that *kti/sij* might be read as ‘creature’ in verses 19-21 but as ‘creation’ in verse 22, and thus suggests that the referent of the earlier verses could be the human body which is awaiting resurrection.<sup>12</sup>

Some, while admitting a non-human reference here, make claims which relativise its importance to Paul and give the passage a more heavily anthropocentric focus. So, C.K. Barrett comments that ‘his main object in mentioning creation is to emphasize the certainty of future salvation for Christians. He is not concerned with creation for its own sake...’.<sup>13</sup> John Gager claims that, in this passage, the admittedly ‘cosmic dimension’ of the term *kti/sij* ‘has been significantly limited to an anthropological category, and its primary reference has become the

---

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Brendan Byrne, *Romans* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), pp. 255-6; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*. Vol. 1. Romans I-VIII (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), pp. 411-12; J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), p. 469; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 506; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 514.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Cranfield, *Romans* pp. 411-12; Moo, *Romans* p. 514.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV The Doctrine of Reconciliation* Vol. 2 (trans. G. W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), p. 329; E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (trans. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 232-3.

<sup>12</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, ‘The Redemption of Our Body: The Riddle of Romans 8:19-22’, in Sven K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright (eds.) *Romans and the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 92-114.

<sup>13</sup> C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1971 [1957]), p. 165.

nonbelieving, human world'.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, G.W.H. Lampe insists that, here and elsewhere in the biblical texts '*man* is in the centre of the picture, and the rest of creation is brought in ... as a sort of adjunct to man, as the backcloth of the human drama, the setting in which the action of God towards man takes place, and the environment to which man is linked by the nature of his physical body'.<sup>15</sup> Still others hedge their bets. According to C.H. Dodd, Paul presumably 'shared with many of his contemporaries the belief that, in the Good Time Coming, the material universe would be transfigured into a substance consisting of pure light or glory, thus returning it to its original perfection as created by God... What it means, in the realm of logic and fact, it is impossible to say'.<sup>16</sup> It is notable that the most anthropocentric readings of the passage date from the 1950s and 60s, when the subordination of creation to redemption promulgated by Gerhard von Rad, and Rudolf Bultmann's existential and anthropocentrising hermeneutic, were prominent influences,<sup>17</sup> and also before ecological concerns pressed onto the agenda.

Writers on ecotheology, by contrast, have cited this passage ever since the field itself emerged in the early 1970s, taking up and stressing the understanding of *kti/sij* as embracing non-human creation.<sup>18</sup> Many of these appeals to Romans 8 are quite brief references in general support of envisaging a positive future for the whole of creation,<sup>19</sup> or to encapsulate the environmental crisis

---

<sup>14</sup> John G. Gager, Jr, 'Functional Diversity in Paul's Use of End-Time Language', *JBL* 89 (1970), pp. 325-37, at p. 329.

<sup>15</sup> G. W. H. Lampe, 'The New Testament Doctrine of *KTISIS*', *SJT* 17 (1964), pp. 449-62, at p. 460. More recently, Schreiner comments that, while the passage talks about creation it 'does not constitute the center stage of Paul's vision', (Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998], p. 437), and Moo claims that 'his focus is consistently on anthropology' (Moo, *Romans*, p. 517, n.50).

<sup>16</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Houghton, 1932), p. 134.

<sup>17</sup> See also Bolt, 'Relation'. With regard to *kti/sij* in our text, Bultmann says 'what is meant is evidently the earth and its creatures subordinate to man, not the *cosmic powers* which are enumerated in 8.38f.' (p. 230) but he goes on to insist that 'Paul's conception of the creation, as of the Creator, depends upon *what it means for man's existence*; under this point of view the creation is ambivalent' (p. 231, our emphasis, in Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. Kendrick Grobel; London: SCM, British edn, 1952).

<sup>18</sup> e.g. R. J. Berry, *Ecology & Ethics* (London: IVP, 1972), p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, R. Elsdon, 'Eschatology and Hope', in R. J. Berry (ed.) *The Care of Creation* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), pp. 161-66; Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*

('creation groaning').<sup>20</sup> Others emphasise nature's value to God by using our passage to support their claims for the inclusion of non-human creation in God's redemptive project. For example, 'An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation' (1994) declares 'full good news for all creation which is still waiting "with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God"'.<sup>21</sup> Citing Rom. 8:23, Jürgen Moltmann writes trenchantly: 'The vision of cosmic redemption through Christ is therefore not a speculation. It emerges logically from the christology and the anthropology. Without these wider horizons, the God of Jesus Christ would not be the creator of the world, and redemption would become a Gnostic myth hostile to the body and the world.'<sup>22</sup> Some writers go further in finding here an expectation that every living creature will eventually be resurrected, a hope that goes back at least as far as Wesley.<sup>23</sup> However, with partial exceptions, none of these writers offers a detailed and hermeneutically-developed engagement with biblical texts such as Romans 8, and most fail to deal with the exegetical uncertainties and its context in the letter to the Romans, or to explore in detail its ecotheological implications.

What then of those engaging in detailed exegetical commentary? As would be expected, it is only in works of the past three or four decades that we find ecological concerns explicitly mentioned in connection with this passage. In a paper as early as 1974, Charles Cranfield stressed that this passage takes us beyond treating the environment well merely because we need it; it has 'a dignity

---

(Cambridge: CUP, 1996), p. 204; H. Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn. The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth. A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), p. 40.

<sup>21</sup> See R. J. Berry, (ed.) *The Care of Creation* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), pp. 17-22 at p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (trans. Margaret Kohl; London: SCM, 1990), p. 283. See also, Sean McDonagh, *Passion for the Earth* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), pp.141-2; Tim Cooper, *Green Christianity. Caring for the Whole Creation* (London: Spire [Hodder & Stoughton], 1990), pp. 64-68; James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 125.

<sup>23</sup> Sermon 60 in *Works*, pp. 241-52. See also Sobosan (1999), although he insists that 'St Paul apparently never imagines that a butterfly might be raised from the dead' (Jeffrey G. Sobosan, *Romancing the Universe: Theology, Science and Cosmology* [Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1999], p. 100).

of its own' and a 'right to be treated by us with reverence and sensitivity'.<sup>24</sup> It should also be noted that John Gibbs, in his 1971 study of the relationship between creation and redemption in Paul's thought, which included an examination of our passage, linked the whole topic to the ecological crisis.<sup>25</sup> But it is only fairly recently that commentators on Romans, as distinct from ecotheologians in general, have drawn out the relevance of this passage for ecological concerns. For example, Brendan Byrne seeks to find a theological framework for thinking about ecological damage in the allusion he finds in v.20 to Adam's sin: '[i]t is not fanciful to understand exploitative human pollution of the environment as part of that "sin" story, along with other evils', and 'there is hope that [creation] may also benefit when and where the "grace" story prevails'.<sup>26</sup> Robert Jewett, in the most recent major commentary on Romans, goes further in reading Paul's comments as expressive of an awareness of human despoilation of the environment: 'it seems likely that Paul has in mind the abuse of the natural world by Adam and his descendants'.<sup>27</sup> With reference to the revelation of the children of God, Jewett suggests, Paul 'assumes that the renewed mind of such groups will be able to discern what God wills for the ecosystem. So the eager longing of the creation awaits the appearance of such transformed persons, knowing that the sources of ecological disorder will be addressed by them in due season'.<sup>28</sup>

There have, of course, also been detailed exegetical and historical-critical monographs focused on this text, most recently that of Harry Hahne.<sup>29</sup> However,

---

<sup>24</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, 'Some Observations on Romans 8:19-21', in Robert Banks (ed.) *Reconciliation and Hope: New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology presented to L. L. Morris on his 60th Birthday* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1974), pp. 224-30, at p. 230.

<sup>25</sup> John G. Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), p. 155.

<sup>26</sup> Byrne, *Romans*, p. 259.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 513.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 512.

<sup>29</sup> Harry Alan Hahne, *The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Nature in Romans 8.19-22 and Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2006). See also Walther Bindemann, *Die Hoffnung der Schöpfung: Römer 8,18-27 und die Frage einer Theologie der Befreiung von Mensch und Natur* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1983); Olle Christoffersson, *The Earnest Expectation of the Creature: The Flood-Tradition as Matrix of Romans 8:18-27* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1990).

while these often at least signal the importance of this text to ecological issues, they do not offer any sustained consideration of its ecological implications nor any extended development of its possible contribution to an ecological theology. The major exception to this general lack of developed engagement between biblical studies and ecological ethics is the work of the Earth Bible Team (2000-2002),<sup>30</sup> whose published volumes include an essay on Romans 8 by Byrne, building on the insights from his commentary, and another by Marie Turner, offering an 'ecojustice' reading of Rom. 8:18-30 in the light of Wisd. 1-2.<sup>31</sup>

In summary, the emergence of general theological reflection on ecological concerns has, unsurprisingly, mirrored the increasing awareness of negative human impact upon the environment over the past few decades. At the same time, the apparent dearth of conspicuously relevant passages in the New Testament<sup>32</sup> has led to this reflection being highly dependent on a limited number of texts, central among which is Rom. 8:19-23. The changing readings of this passage – traceable, for example, through the work of commentators such as Barrett, Cranfield, and most recently Jewett, as cited above – gives a clear indication of the way in which the issues and challenges of the contemporary context shape the questions brought to the text and in turn shape the interpretation of the meaning of the text.

However, the survey above also reveals that while there is, of course, plenty of difference and disagreement over the topic of the passage, this is not necessarily closely tied to the emergence of an ecological perspective. For example, earlier

---

<sup>30</sup> Norman C. Habel, (ed.) *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*. Vol. 1, *The Earth Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Norman C. Habel, (ed.) *The Earth Story in Psalms and Prophets*. Vol. 4, *The Earth Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); Norman C. Habel, and Vicky Balabanski, (eds.) *The Earth Story in the New Testament*. Vol. 5, *The Earth Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002); Norman C. Habel, and S. Wurst, (eds.) *The Earth Story in Genesis*. Vol. 2, *The Earth Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Norman C. Habel, and S. Wurst, (eds.) *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions*. Vol. 3, *The Earth Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> Brendan Byrne, 'Creation Groaning: An Earth Bible Reading of Romans 8.18-22', in Norman C. Habel (ed.) *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 193-203; Marie Turner, 'God's Design: The Death of Creation ? An Ecojustice Reading of Romans 8.18-30 in the Light of Wisdom 1-2', in Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst (eds.) *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 168-78.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation. An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM, 1985), p. 65.



commentators such as Luther can agree with the current consensus that *kti/sij* refers to creation other than humanity. Irenaeus and Calvin can both envisage a new age in which created beings other than humans enjoy an existence which exceeds current experience and which, in Calvin's case, is non-instrumental – they will be restored even though they will no longer be needed by humankind (*Inst.* 3.25.11).<sup>33</sup>

What has changed in the last few decades is the significance commentators see in that attitude towards creation, and the interest they show in developing the theme of its freedom. Indeed, just as Romans 9-11 has been rescued from its marginalisation as an unimportant excursus under the influence of a contemporary context more attuned to the relevance of Jewish-Christian relations,<sup>34</sup> so Rom. 8:19-23 may come to be seen as a (even *the*?) theological climax of the letter, under the influence of a context in which the magnitude of the ecological challenge is increasingly a point of public and political consensus.

It is also clear, however, that many appeals to this text build a great deal on a rather slim basis, either by assuming that a passing reference to Romans 8 is sufficient to undergird a substantial Christian environmental ethic<sup>35</sup> or by attributing to Paul an unlikely and anachronistic insight into the causes of ecological disorder and the need to address these.<sup>36</sup> After all, in these few verses Paul gives little guide to any developed view of creation's significance and future destiny. Are there then ways of exploring the potential of Romans 8 to contribute

---

<sup>33</sup> John T. McNeill, (ed.) *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Vol. 2 (Books 3.20 to 4.20), *Library of Christian Classics Vol XXI* (trans. Ford Lewis Battles, London: SCM, 1960), pp. 1006-7.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., the summary comment on the changed perception of Rom 9-11 in Karl P. Donfried, *The Romans Debate* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, Revised and Expanded edn, 1977 (1991)) p. lxx, and the statement in John Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity, 1989), p. 37: '9-11 constitute a climax (even *the* climax) to the total argument'.

<sup>35</sup> For example, a bald reference to Rom. 8:20 was recently used to claim that 'one of the chief roles of a Christian is to be a co-worker with God in the continuous repair of the created order, (which has the tendency to decay into disorganised systems), to bring new things into existence and to establish new patterns of order' (Brian Heap, and Flavio Comin, 'Consumption and Happiness: Christian Values and an Approach towards Sustainability', in R. J. Berry [ed.] *When Enough is Enough: A Christian Framework for Environmental Sustainability* [Nottingham: Apollos (IVP), 2007], pp. 79-98, p. 96). On the superficiality of many appeals to this text, cf. also the comment of Byrne, 'Creation Groaning', p. 193.

<sup>36</sup> As in Jewett, *Romans*, pp. 512-15.

to an environmental theology which avoid some of the pitfalls of the ecologically attractive but exegetically superficial or implausible arguments found in some recent appeals to this text?

### **A narrative approach to Romans 8:19-23**

One relatively recent and significant development in Pauline studies is the narrative approach, pioneered by Richard Hays in his 1983 study of Gal. 3:1-4:11. Using literary tools derived from the work of A.J. Greimas, Hays seeks to determine the 'narrative substructure' – the story of Christ – on which a clearly non-narrative text is dependent.<sup>37</sup> This kind of narrative approach has since been developed in studies of the NT and specifically of Paul by N.T. Wright, Ben Witherington III, and James Dunn, among others.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the narrative approach links into comparable developments in theology, philosophy and ethics, from the early kinds of narrative theology explored by George Stroup and the philosophical argument for a narrative basis to ethics presented by Alasdair MacIntyre, to the contemporary articulations (by Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank, among others) of Christianity as a competing narrative in a world of stories.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 1997 [1983]).

<sup>38</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998); Ben Witherington, III, *Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1994); N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992). For an overview of these developments, see Bruce W. Longenecker, 'Narrative Interest in the Study of Paul', in Bruce W. Longenecker (ed.) *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2002), pp. 3-16; Bruce W. Longenecker, 'The Narrative Approach to Paul: An Early Retrospective', *Currents in Biblical Research* 1.1 (2002), pp. 88-111.

<sup>39</sup> George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology* (London: SCM, British edn, 1984 [1981]); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981) and, for example, Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame/London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990). For brief comments on this wider development in connection with the parallels in biblical studies, see David G. Horrell, 'Paul's Narratives or Narrative Substructure? The Significance of 'Paul's Story'', in Bruce W. Longenecker (ed.) *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2002), pp. 157-71, especially pp. 168-71.

Despite the continuing debate on the value of seeking a narrative underpinning Paul's theology,<sup>40</sup> a narrative approach would seem to offer a fruitful way to approach this particular text for at least two reasons. One is that, like other non-narrative passages in Paul, this seems to be a text which, while itself brief and frustratingly allusive, depends on a certain story about the past, present and the future of creation in God's saving purposes. Creation 'is waiting with eager longing' (a0pekde/xetai), 'was subjected to futility' (u9peta&gh), in hope that it 'will be set free' (e0leuqerwqh/setai) (Rom. 8:19-21). Since the account of our subject not only also has a beginning, a middle, and an end, but also entails a transformation, this allows us to construct the outlines of a narrative trajectory,<sup>41</sup> while the employment of ga&r and o3ti indicates causal links between the elements, thus constituting a plot.<sup>42</sup> Examining the thought-world which Paul inhabits, in order to try to reconstruct something of what this narrative may have been, would help to fill out the content of the story of creation that underpins Romans 8. A second, more specific reason, is that the text itself hints that it depends on a shared narrative basis. Paul introduces his comment about creation groaning with the words oildamen ga\r o3ti, 'we know that...' (v. 22). Most commentators agree that this indicates that Paul is here appealing to knowledge that he can reasonably presume his readers share.<sup>43</sup> So what exactly is it that 'we know'? What kind of story of creation forms the narrative substructure of this text?

---

<sup>40</sup> See Bruce W. Longenecker, (ed.) *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

<sup>41</sup> Michael J. Toolan, *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction* (London/New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 4-8.

<sup>42</sup> Mark Allen Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism? A New Approach to the Bible* (London: SPCK, 1993), p. 40.

<sup>43</sup> For example Christoffersson, *Earnest Expectation*, p. 108; Cranfield, *Romans*, p. 416; Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, p. 472; Jewett, *Romans*, p. 516; although Sanday & Headlam point out that 'the apprehension of it may not have been so common as he [Paul] assumes' (in William Sanday, and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 5th edn, 1905], p. 209).

## **The story of creation in Rom. 8:19-23**

In considering the possible story of creation which Paul had in mind it will be helpful first to outline the elements of the 'plot' and to establish which points are open to debate. The chronological distinctions, it should be noted, while significant to the direction of the plot, are often highly fuzzy, since past-present and present-future are inextricably connected in Paul's presentation here.

*Past (with ongoing present reality):*

1. Paul's use of *kti/sij* (vv. 19-23) itself implies some past event or act of making/founding/creating, though it remains open to discussion whether the reference is to the whole product of such an event ('the creation', *in toto*), or to an individual who has been created ('the creature').
2. The current, and presumably prior, state, of *kti/sij*, is bondage to decay, (v. 21). The precise sense remains unspecified, and the meaning is dependent in part on the content ascribed to *kti/sij*.
3. *kti/sij* has been subjected to futility, of an unspecified nature, not of its own choice, though the subjector is not named (v. 20). These two facets of creation's existence highlight the negative dimensions of its past and present experience, which are transformed with the resolution of the story.

*Present (continuing from the past)*

4. The whole of *kti/sij* is personified as having been, and continuing to, 'co-groan' in 'co-travail' 'until now' (v. 22).
5. In this, it accompanies, or is accompanied by, the inward groaning of Paul and his audience, defined as those 'who have the first fruits of the Spirit' (v. 23).

## *Future*

6. *kti/sij* longs (now) to see the (future) revealing of the 'sons of God' (whose identity is debated [v. 19]).
7. Those (human) hearers who have the 'first fruits of the Spirit' wait for adoption as God's sons, when their bodies will be redeemed (v. 23).
8. *kti/sij* will be, or hopes to be, liberated from bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the children of God (v. 21). Here the plot looks forward to a final transformation which resolves and surpasses the negative state of decay and futility.

Clearly this rich and complex text presents many issues for exegetical discussion, far too many to be treated adequately in a single paper. We shall focus, then, on the points most crucial for establishing what kind of 'story of creation' is presumed and reflected here.

### *1. The kti/sij*

Since the term *kti/sij* itself implies a creative act, that may be taken as the first event in our narrative. Although the act of creation itself is not described here at all, it seems reasonable to assume – not least given Paul's frequent references to Genesis 1-3<sup>44</sup> – that God's creation of the world as depicted in Gen. 1-2 underpins Paul's reference here (cf. Rom. 4:17) despite there being no occurrence of the noun *kti/sij* in LXX Genesis. As discussed above, a number of writers throughout history have assumed that the term here refers to what we would call 'nature', even if they differed as to whether or not other entities, human or angelic, were included with it.<sup>45</sup> With few exceptions, the consensus amongst recent writers is that *kti/sij* refers to non-human creation with or without remainder. Perhaps the subsequent association of this term with

---

<sup>44</sup> See Francis Watson, 'Strategies of Recovery and Resistance: Hermeneutical Reflections on Genesis 1-3 and its Pauline Reception', *JSNT* 45 (1992), pp. 79-103.

<sup>45</sup> The term is generally assumed to apply to various combinations of one or more of the following non-overlapping sets: angelic beings, believers, non-believers, non-human living creation, the inanimate elements of non-human creation.

‘decay’ (f̄qora&), with its own connotations of processes of life and death, suggests that Paul has primarily in mind non-human *living* things, rather than the inanimate features of the creation. It is clear that the ‘expectation’ and ‘groaning’ of k̄ti/sīj does not preclude a global or cosmic point of reference for the subject of our story, since such personification is common in the Hebrew scriptures of which Paul makes frequent use. (Elements of creation are commonly personified in the LXX [for example, Isa. 44:23; 49:13; 55:12-13; Pss. 64:13-14; 97:7-9 LXX] and this passage does have a poetic quality about it).<sup>46</sup> There are, then, good grounds to conclude that this passage is saying something about non-human creation, whatever precisely is or is not included in Paul’s implicit definition – something it is impossible to determine.

## 2. *The bondage to decay*

Creation’s enslavement to decay (h9 doulei/a th=j f̄qora=j) is mentioned only as that from which creation will be liberated (v. 21). It is therefore difficult to determine what kind of ‘event’ in the story this depicts, and whether it precedes, follows, or is coterminous with its ‘subjection to futility’ (see next section). Significantly, in terms of the narrative dynamics, this depicts the parlous state in which k̄ti/sīj now exists, the resolution of which will bring the story to its climactic and glorious conclusion. Although not explicitly stated in the text, it is often assumed that the bondage to decay derives from or is concomitant with the subjection of k̄ti/sīj to futility. In other words, bondage to decay specifies what subjection to futility implies.<sup>47</sup> However, this assumption should be questioned, since it gives a somewhat odd construal of the underlying logic of the

<sup>46</sup> Cranfield, *Romans*, p. 404. It is also notable that both Stoics (cf. Michael Lapidge, ‘Stoic Cosmology and Roman Literature, First to Third Centuries A.D.’ *ANRW* II.36.3 [1989], pp. 1379-429, at pp. 1381-5), and Platonists could speak of the whole cosmos as living: ‘the universe resembles more closely than anything else that Living Thing of which all other living things are parts.....[the god] made it a single visible living thing’ (Plato, *Tim.* 30c & d). We are grateful to Dr Vicky Balabanski for these references.

<sup>47</sup> Chrysostom makes this link: ‘What is the meaning of “the creation was made subject to vanity?” Why that it became corruptible.’ (*Hom. Rom.* 14). Cf. Dunn, *Romans* 1-8, p. 470: ‘mataio&thj can be regarded as nearly equivalent to f̄qora&... so long as the full sweep of *both* words is borne in mind’. Jewett, *Romans*, pp. 513-15, speaks of vanity and ‘resultant corruption’ while Byrne, *Romans*, p. 261, sees slavery resulting from subjection.

passage: if 'futility' consists in creation's 'bondage to decay', then God has subjected creation to decay in hope that it might be freed from decay. In particular, the striking description of the subjection as being done 'in hope' suggests that creation's 'futility' was, in the divine economy, the *prelude to liberation* from bondage to decay (*not* the bondage to decay *per se*), in other words, part of the solution (in some mysterious way) rather than part of (or merely a symptom of) the problem. On this reading there would be an interesting though partial parallel with the depiction of human rebellion in Rom. 1:18-32, where humanity's refusal to know and worship God leads to God's 'giving them over' to sinful passions. The refusal to acknowledge God is not *identified* with the enslavement to sinful passions but precedes God's (consequent) act in handing them over, an act which forms a part – if a difficult and enigmatic one – in the economy of salvation: God has consigned all to disobedience, in order to have mercy on all (Rom. 11:32; cf. Rom. 5:20; Gal. 3:19-24). Similarly, creation came under enslavement to decay, and was then (as a consequence?) subjected by God to futility, in hope... But this is to jump ahead in our account.

If the reference in v. 19, either partially or *in toto*, is to mortal creatures, as seems most likely, then this bondage to decay would presumably be, or at least include, a reference to the inevitability of physical death. This verse has thus been widely seen to support the idea that Paul has in mind here the account of the 'Fall', since Adam and Eve were warned that death would be the result of their eating fruit of the forbidden tree (Gen. 2:17; 3:19).<sup>48</sup> Paul alludes to this event in Rom. 5:12,14, in the context of human death, so the reference here to *fqora&* would imply that he sees death in the natural world as another consequence of primæval human disobedience;<sup>49</sup> in this connection, *fqora&* is sometimes taken

---

<sup>48</sup> Byrne, *Romans*, p. 260; Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, p. 470: 'the primary allusion is to the Adam narratives'.

<sup>49</sup> Hahne, *Corruption and Redemption*, p. 195.

as having some kind of moral connotation, such as degradation, as well as related physical implications.<sup>50</sup>

However, the specifically Adamic reference here is less obvious than most commentators take to be the case. Aside from the obvious fact that Adam is nowhere mentioned in Rom. 8:19-23 — a point to which we shall return — Paul's language here does not specifically echo the LXX account of Adam and Eve's 'fall'. The curse of Genesis 3 is upon the fruitfulness of the 'ground' (Heb: *hmd*) ; LXX: *gh=* [Gen. 3:17]), which does not appear to represent the entire living (non-human) creation, but only a specific part of it, the soil or earth, as the reference to thorns, thistles and plants in the subsequent verse of Genesis 3 shows. In large part, the change of usage from *gh=* to *kṭi/sij* is reflective of a linguistic development in Jewish literature of the period,<sup>51</sup> though it is also one which expands and emphasises the cosmic dimensions of references to the 'earth'.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, without denying that the action of Adam is, for Paul, a fundamental point from which corruption and death enter the created order, it is worth considering that — given only a brief and allusive reference to the enslavement of the whole *kṭi/sij* to *fqora&* — what Paul has in view here is a broader allusion to the unfolding story of Genesis 1–11, in which corruption affects all flesh (*r#b lk/pa=sa sa&rc*; note the repeated use of *katafqi/rw* in Gen.

---

<sup>50</sup> See Fitzmyer, *Romans*, p. 509. The idea of *fqora&* having any moral content in this context is rejected by others, e.g. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, p. 472, and Hahne, *Corruption and Redemption*, p. 195. Interestingly, Pseudo-Jonathan's targum on Gen. 3.17 comments that the ground was cursed 'because it did not show forth your guilt' (John Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretations of Scripture* [Cambridge: CUP, 1969], p. 121).

<sup>51</sup> Edward Adams, *Constructing the World* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), pp. 77-80, commenting on the linguistic background of *kṭi/sij*, notes that its use to denote God's creative activity is 'a linguistic innovation on the part of the translators of the Greek Old Testament' (p. 77). Foerster notes the more usual sense of *kṭi/sij* in Greek in NT times (founding of cities) and, pointing out the use of *kṭi/zw* to denote divine activity in the LXX (4 or 5 in the Pentateuch, none in the historical books, 15 in the prophets, 9 in the writings, and 36 in the apocrypha), suggests its theological significance only arose after the first works of the LXX (the Torah) were translated. It is clear that it emerges most prominently only in the apocryphal books (Werner Foerster, '*kṭi/zw?*' in *TDNT* III: 1000-35, at p. 1025).

<sup>52</sup> Adams, *Constructing the World*, p. 178, notes that 'Paul, in line with later Jewish reflection on that text [Gen 3.17-19] expands the scale of the judgement to cosmic dimensions.'



6:12).<sup>53</sup> This would suggest that the *fqora* to which Paul alludes is a broader phenomenon than simply a reference to mortality.

### 3. Subjection to futility

The next event in the implied story is that *kṭi/sij* 'was subjected to futility' (v. 20), though whether this should be seen as prior to, coterminous with, or following the enslavement to decay is, as we have noted, open to discussion. This phrase, as with the 'enslavement to decay' (v. 21), is commonly taken to be a reference to the curse on the ground (Gen. 3:17), following Adam and Eve's disobedience,<sup>54</sup> thus 'the one who subjected it' is generally — and convincingly, in our view — taken to be a divine passive, even though the cause of creation's subjection can be traced back to Adam.<sup>55</sup> So, Luther declares that 'through man the whole creature becomes vanity, though, to be sure, against its will... For created things are good in themselves'.<sup>56</sup> And Calvin maintains that creatures 'are bearing part of the punishment deserved by man, for whose use they were created' (*Inst.* 2.1.5).<sup>57</sup> Similarly, and much more recently, Harry Hahne argues that Rom. 8:19-22 is 'consistent with that strand of Jewish apocalyptic writings that emphasize human responsibility for the corruption of the world' and he sees the focus of the passage as being on Adam's sin as the initiation point for

---

<sup>53</sup> Christoffersson builds on the idea that the Flood story provides the background to Paul's use of *kṭi/sij* here, and argues that the 'sons of God' (v. 19) is a reference to Gen. 6:2, with the development of this story in the Enochic traditions lying behind Paul's allusions. However, Paul nowhere else makes reference to this tradition or to the story of the Watchers — unlike some other New Testament letters (1 Pet. 3:19-20; 2 Pet. 2:4-5; 3:5-6; Jude 6) — and Christoffersson's reading of the *ui9oi\ tou= qeou=* in Rom. 8:19 is implausible; see below and Christoffersson, *Earnest Expectation*.

<sup>54</sup> E.g. Cranfield, *Romans*, p. 413; Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, p. 470. John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965) comments that 'In relation to the earth this is surely Paul's commentary on Gen. 3.17, 18' (p. 303).

<sup>55</sup> See e.g. Cranfield, *Romans*, p. 414; Dodd, *Romans*, p. 134; Franz J. Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary* (London: Lutterworth, 1961), p. 220; Moo, *Romans*, p. 516. See also Jewett, *Romans*, p. 513, who cites a telling parallel from a magical spell influenced by Jewish language: '...the [holy] and honoured name to whom all creation is subjected [*h( pa~sa kṭi/sij [u9]po&keitai*']'. Alternatively, the act of subjection may be attributed more directly to Adam; see Byrne, *Romans* p. 258; and Byrne, 'Creation Groaning'.

<sup>56</sup> Pauck, (ed.) *Luther*, p. 238.

<sup>57</sup> McNeill, (ed.) *Calvin's Institutes*, p. 246.

ongoing sinfulness.<sup>58</sup> In most Jewish apocalyptic writings creation is not portrayed as sinful or fallen in itself, although its functioning, or rather malfunctioning, sometimes acts as an indicator of malaise.<sup>59</sup> While Rom. 8:19-22 does not unpack the symptoms of futility or decay, Hahne suggests that examples given in Jewish apocalyptic writings indicate what Paul may have had in mind: hardship, disease, and death.<sup>60</sup>

However, it is once again worth taking seriously that in Rom. 8:19-23 whatever precisely is in Paul's mind as the *reason* for creation's subjection to futility, he makes no explicit mention of any such reason. Paul makes no indisputable reference to Adam (nor to the Watchers,<sup>61</sup> nor to any other specific event in the primal history of Genesis 1–11); nor does he closely echo the 'fall'/curse story of Genesis 3. While it is clear enough, from what Paul says elsewhere (Rom. 5:12) that he sees 'one man' as the source of sin's entry into the world, and, through sin, death, it should not be assumed that this particular event is equally prominent in the background of Rom. 8:19-23, not least given the rather distinctive content of Paul's compressed allusions to the story of *kti/sij*. In particular, the crucial word *mataio/thj* evokes no specific allusion to the Genesis stories. Again there is a comparison to be drawn with Rom. 1:18-32. While scholars have argued that Adam's story underlies that text too,<sup>62</sup> specific allusions are far from clear.<sup>63</sup> What does appear as the prominent theme is the

---

<sup>58</sup> Hahne, *Corruption and Redemption*, p. 211.

<sup>59</sup> *Jub.* 3:24-5 echoes Gen. 3:16-19 (labour and thistles) adding that 'on that day the mouths of all the wild animals and the cattle and the birds, and of everything that walks or moves, were shut, so that they could no longer speak (for up till then they had all spoken with one another in a common tongue)' (3.28). Cf. also *1 En.* 80:2-4. *Apoc. Moses* (after Paul) continues this theme, with the Fall resulting in animals disobeying humans (10:1-11:3; 24:4), and leaves falling from trees (20:4).

<sup>60</sup> Hahne, *Corruption and Redemption*, pp. 212-13.

<sup>61</sup> *Contra* Christofferson, *Earnest Expectation*.

<sup>62</sup> E.g., Morna D. Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), pp. 76-84, who, focusing on Rom. 1:23, sees here a clear reference to the story of the Fall.

<sup>63</sup> For example, Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2004), p. 144, sees this particular verse (Rom. 1:23) as an allusion to the account of the golden calf, while Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 86-90, noting the 'absence of Adam', prefers to see the decline of a golden age following the hubris shown at the tower of Babel, and the consequent emergence of Abraham's descendants as a nation distinct from others, as the background to the whole of Rom. 1.

activity of humanity in general, in turning from worship of God to idolatry and sexual immorality. In other words, just as Rom. 8:19-23 paints a general (if highly compact) picture of the futility of *kṭi/sij*, so Rom. 1:18-32 paints a general (and more extended) picture of the corruption and futility of humanity. One difference is that, while humanity's actions are depicted as knowingly and deliberately done (1:19-21), there is no suggestion of creation's refusal to acknowledge or worship God, simply the declaration that the subjection was *not* willed on the part of *kṭi/sij*. Crucially, however, the same root (*mataio-*) is used in both texts (Rom. 1:21; 8:20).

As Cranfield notes, the content of the term *mataio/thj* is subject to various interpretations;<sup>64</sup> it may simply relate to mortality as experienced by every life form,<sup>65</sup> or refer to the mis-use of elements of creation as objects of idolatry (linking back to Paul's theme in Rom. 1, especially v. 21).<sup>66</sup> It is significant to note that *mataio/thj* is a distinctively Jewish/Christian word, and used in the LXX only in the Psalms, Prov. 22:8, and (most extensively) in Ecclesiastes (note esp. 3:19, where the fact that both human and animal share the same fate in death is an indication that *ta\ pa\nta mataio/thj*). This, along with the echoes of the Wisdom of Solomon in Rom. 1:18-32 and Paul's citation of Ps. 93:11 [LXX] in 1 Cor. 3:20, suggests that a Wisdom influence is most likely in Rom. 8:20. Paul here indicates, echoing the constant theme of Qoheleth,<sup>67</sup> that the existence of creation (and of humanity) is futile and frustrated, since it is unable to achieve its purpose, or to emerge from the constant cycle of toil, suffering and death.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Cranfield, *Romans*, pp. 413-4.

<sup>65</sup> Byrne, *Romans*, pp. 260-1. See further, under §2 above.

<sup>66</sup> Another suggestion is that it could imply the subjection of creation to the dominion of celestial authorities. Cf. Barrett, *Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 165-6.

<sup>67</sup> Otto Bauernfeind, '*ma/taioj*?' in *TDNT* IV: 519-24, at p. 523, sees Rom. 8:20 as 'a valid commentary on Qoh.' and Jewett thinks that this verse would have brought Eccl. 1:2 to mind in the letter's audience (Jewett, *Romans*, p. 513). See critique of this by Hahne, *Corruption and Redemption*, p. 190. Paradoxically, R. J. Berry, *God's Book of Works. The Nature and Theology of Nature* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2003), p. 231, sees the whole of Qoheleth as a commentary on the Romans passage (presumably in some anachronistic sense)!

<sup>68</sup> Cf. also N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), pp. 116-7. This futility is sometimes attributed directly to the failure of humankind to play its part in creation: Byrne, *Romans*, p. 258; Cranfield, *Romans*, pp. 413-4.

What is worth emphasising is that, whatever Paul sees as the cause of creation's subjection to futility, his focus is only on the fact of that subjection to futility, and on what lies ahead of it in the narrative plot. The one who does the subjecting is God, the implied agent of the (divine) passive *u9peta&gh*; this was not something willed by *kti/sij* itself. But right from the start, according to Paul, this was a subjection (by God) *in hope*.

#### 4.& 5. *Creation's groaning in travail and the groaning of Paul and other Christians*

Moving on into the 'present tense' of our narrative, the groaning and travailing of creation has been variously interpreted: as its suffering of decay and death, or related to its frustration at being unable to fulfil its purpose in God's plans in conjunction with a humanity in right relationship with God.<sup>69</sup> The use of language associated with labour pains has often led commentators to see here a reference to the so-called 'messianic woes'; the advent of the messiah is linked with an expectation of tribulation for humanity often concomitant with upheavals in the natural world, reaching a climax before the 'birth' of the new age.<sup>70</sup>

The text does suggest some sense of eschatological climax in the pregnant phrase *a!xri tou= nu=n*, 'right up to now' (8:22) and there are clear precedents in Jewish literature for anticipating times of upheaval in creation before the end of this present age, whichever form that end might take (e.g. Isa. 24:1, 3-7, 19-20; 1*En.* 80.2-8; *Jub.* 23.18; 1QH XI.29-36; *Sib. Or.* 3.673-681).<sup>71</sup> However, Paul does not indicate that the groaning itself is a characteristic only or specifically of the 'end of the age' (cf. 1 Cor. 10:11). Rather, creation's travail *continues* right up till the present time (in which the eager expectation of

<sup>69</sup> Leenhardt, *Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 219-25; Moo, *Romans*, p. 515; Byrne, *Romans*, p. 258.

<sup>70</sup> There is a pre-Pauline link between the judgment and labour pains (1 *En.* 62:4 and 1QH 3:7-18) but a specific link with the messiah only seems to occur in later writings (Cranfield, *Romans*, p. 416; E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* [London: SCM, 1985], p. 124). Other proposals include Sylvia Keesmaat's argument that the narrative of the Exodus provides some of the background story to Paul's thought here (Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Paul and his Story: (Re)Interpreting the Exodus Tradition* Vol. 181 [Sheffield: JSNTSupp, 1999], p. 89) and Laurie Braaten's recent proposal that creation's groaning expresses its mourning over human sin (Laurie J. Braaten, 'All Creation Groans: Romans 8:22 in Light of the Biblical Sources', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 28 [2006], pp. 131-59).

<sup>71</sup> See Edward Adams, *The Stars Will Fall From Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and its World* (London: T&T Clark, 2007) for a survey of eschatological scenarios.

redemption is reaching fever pitch). Thus, this 'labouring' of the *kti/sij* seems to be depicted as an ongoing and contemporary feature of its existence, as might be expected if Paul has in mind the primæval spread of *fqora&* and the divine subjection of *kti/sij* to futility.

Again there are parallels in prophetic and inter-testamental writings, where, for example, the earth (*gh=*) is depicted as mourning (Isa. 24:4; Jer. 4:28), speaking (Hos. 2:22) or crying out (1 *En.* 9.2). The specific image of labour pains recalls the depiction in Jewish writings of the earth as a womb (Job 1:21; see also 4 Ezra 10:6-14; Philo *Op. Mundi* 13.43; see §7 below).<sup>72</sup> Once again Paul uses *kti/sij* rather than *gh=*, reflecting the developing prominence of this term, though this also serves to emphasise the cosmic scope of the narrative drama.<sup>73</sup> The verb *stena&zw* is also elsewhere used to depict the cries of suffering Israel.<sup>74</sup>

So the groaning of creation is an ongoing characteristic of its current existence, though it has, according to Paul, reached a crucial moment of eschatological expectation. It is clearly a forward-looking anguish. Also striking is Paul's description of creation as co-groaning and co-travailing (*sustena/zei kai\ sunwdi/nei*). With whom is the creation groaning? Most commentators consider that the use of *pa=sa* and the content of the following verse rules out the suggestion that the co-groaning is specifically with believers or the whole of humanity.<sup>75</sup> The meaning, they suggest, is that all creation is groaning together, amongst itself, or 'with one accord'.<sup>76</sup> However, since creation is here depicted as a singular character (*h9 kti/sij*), and since Paul's characteristic use of *sun-*

<sup>72</sup> Luzia Sutter Rehman, 'To Turn the Groaning into Labor: Romans 8.22-23', in Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Bickenstaff (eds.) *A Feminist Companion to Paul* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2004), pp. 74-83, at pp. 80-1, emphasises the importance of the earth as a place of transformation and notes parallels between ancient views of the earth and the uterus.

<sup>73</sup> See nn. 51 & 52 above.

<sup>74</sup> See Rehman, 'To Turn the Groaning', p. 79, who notes this use by Philo (*stenei=n*; *Leg. All.*, 3.212) and Josephus (*stena&zein*; *War.* 5.384).

<sup>75</sup> E.g., Barrett, *Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 166-67; Cranfield, *Romans*, pp. 416-17; Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, p. 472; Byrne, *Romans*, p. 261; Moo, *Romans*, p. 518.

<sup>76</sup> Cranfield, *Romans*, p. 417.

words generally indicates a clear conjoining of one partner or group with another, this may be questioned.<sup>77</sup> The groaning of Christian believers is described in exactly the same terms (stena/zomen), and the Spirit is later described as joining with the Christians in their groaning, interceding with groans of its own (stenagmoi=j). The grammar of v. 23 is awkward, as the textual variants indicate, but the sense may be construed as implying that not only (ou0 mo/non de/) does creation join in the eschatological groaning, but that, in particular and in addition, ‘we ourselves’ (h(me=j kai\ au)toi/)<sup>78</sup> groan ‘in ourselves’ (e)n e(autoi=j), and groan specifically in anticipation of adoption as sons – a specific hope for which creation could not groan. Creation’s groaning is a co-groaning with Paul and other Christians and the Spirit, a shared travail that also represents a shared hope, though some aspects of that hope are distinctive to the ‘sons of God’,<sup>79</sup> who are here described as those who have ‘the first fruits of the Spirit’ (Rom. 8:23; cf. 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5 where the Spirit is described as a first instalment or a)rrabw&n). The common vocabulary used to describe creation, humanity, and the Spirit indicates that somehow they are caught up in the same process, yearning for the same outcome, which the future dimensions of the story will go on to depict.

## 6. Creation’s eager longing

Our third present event, the waiting-while-craning-its-neck of kti/sij, reinforces the personification of the subject of our narrative, discussed above. The immediate focus of creation’s longing is the revelation of the ‘sons of God’ (v. 19). There has been some debate as to the identity of the ui9oi\ tou= qeou= in this verse, and possible differences in referent between this term and the te/kna tou= qeou= of v. 21. Tracing his suggested background to this

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Rom. 6:4-8; 8:16-17; Gal. 2:19.

<sup>78</sup> Cranfield, *Romans*, p. 417, followed by Dunn, notes how ‘extremely emphatic’ is the repeated au)toi/, ‘even more so with e)n e(autoi=j following’ (Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, p. 474).

<sup>79</sup> See again Rehman, ‘To Turn the Groaning’, who stresses both the sharing of travail and the shared work of liberation (pp. 80-2).

passage in the Flood tradition, Christoffersson notes the use of *ui9oi\ tou= qeou=* in Gen. 6:2 to refer to what are also called the Watchers in the Enochic tradition and suggests that ‘sons of god’ here refers to the angels who are expected to accompany Christ at the *parousi/a*.<sup>80</sup> *Ui9oi* is used, he suggests, to denote the angels as opposed to the believers who are referred to as *te/kna*. However, since Paul has already used *ui9oi/* to refer to his readers earlier in this part of the letter (Rom. 8:14), uses *ui9oqesi/a* to denote what the Christians yearn for, and goes on to apply it to the people of God shortly thereafter (Rom. 9:26),<sup>81</sup> we find this argument unconvincing. So, we assume that *kth/sij* here is eagerly awaiting the revelation of the Christian believers and that this unveiling is related to their adoption as sons spoken of in v. 23.

#### 7. The adoption of the *ui9oi\ qeou=*

The way in which Paul talks of adoption in Romans 8 is sometimes cited as an example of the ‘already-but-not-yet’ tension in much of his teaching. Earlier in this chapter he speaks of the believers as having the Spirit (v. 9), of the Spirit living in them (v. 11), and leading them (v. 14). They are children (*ui9oi/*) of God (v. 14) who have received a spirit of adoption (v. 15) which confirms to them that they are children of God (v. 16). Therefore, it is unsurprising that in verse 23 he speaks of his readers having the Spirit as first fruits but, on the face of it, somewhat surprising that he sees himself and believers as groaning as they wait for their adoption. However, adoption is specified here as referring to the redemption of their bodies, suggesting a reference to the resurrection.<sup>82</sup> This may connect with the language of parturition noted above (§4); in the Hebrew scriptures, the earth may be portrayed as a womb, more specifically in the context of it giving birth to the resurrected dead within it (Isa. 26:19: ‘the earth will

<sup>80</sup> Christoffersson, *Earnest Expectation*, pp. 103-4, 120-24.

<sup>81</sup> See also *ui9oi/* in speaking of the children of Israel (2 Cor. 3:13) and believers, elsewhere in the undisputed Pauline epistles (2 Cor. 6:18 citing Hos. 2:1 LXX; Gal. 3:7, 26; 4:6-7).

<sup>82</sup> See Paul’s teaching on the resurrection body (1 Cor. 15:35-54; 2 Cor. 5:1-5).

give birth to those long dead', cf also 4 Ezra 7:32).<sup>83</sup> There may be in Romans 8 an 'echo' of these texts, wherein the birthpangs of creation relate to the expected 'delivery' of the bodies of the resurrected believers. In his most famous and extended discussion of the resurrection, Paul gives a sense of the 'order' of events which must take place: first is Christ, who is *a0parxh&*; then those who belong to Christ at his *parousi/a* (1 Cor. 15:23). Then, interestingly, Paul simply skips to 'the end', *to\ te/loj*, when Christ hands the kingdom to the Father, having destroyed every power that stands in opposition to God (v. 24). He sees the final event in this battle as the defeat of death itself, 'the last enemy' (vv. 25-26). While *kthi/sij* is simply absent from the picture here – though note *ta\ pa/nta* in vv. 27-28 – this text offers some further support for the idea that the bondage to decay, from which Christians and creation will be delivered, is death itself. The connotations of *mataio/thj*, as we have seen, probably include this idea (cf. Eccl. 3:19) but also a sense of purposelessness. 1 Corinthians 15 also supports what seems to be a sequence, presumed here in Romans 8, where the resurrection of the sons of God is the initial event in a series that will eventually encompass all things, the entire *kthi/sij*.

#### 8. *The liberation of kthi/sij*

This brings us to the climax of our narrative. While the revelation of the sons of God forms the immediate focus of creation's expectation this is important not simply in itself, but insofar as it heralds a wider process of eschatological transformation. The hope which always accompanied the creation's subjection to futility was and is the hope that the creation itself will be liberated. Creation, one might say, has a vested interest in its yearning to see the revelation of the sons of God, their liberation and their glory.

It would seem reasonable to suppose that Paul here envisages a situation where *kthi/sij*, along with believers, will enjoy freedom from death and decay. These processes 'entered in' through Adam, and came to affect the whole created

---

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Rehman, 'To Turn the Groaning', p. 81.



order, which was subjected (by God) to futility, yet they will be abolished in Christ (Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:22). Hahne finds parallels with a specific strand of tradition in Jewish apocalyptic, whereby creation as a whole, not just humanity, will be redeemed, specifically by a process of renewal rather than by its destruction and recreation.<sup>84</sup>

### *Summary*

What then can we conclude about the shape of the story of creation, as it appears to be reflected in Paul's brief and allusive discussion? The following would seem to be an appropriate summary:

The non-human creation (whatever precisely the scope of that notion) is in 'enslavement to decay', a notion which would appear to refer to physical death and more broadly to destruction and decay, perhaps in a moral as well as physical sense. Given what we know of Paul's thought elsewhere, it is likely that the sin of Adam, through which sin and death entered the world, forms the basic and initial cause for the creation's bondage to decay, though we should take seriously – more seriously than most commentators do – the possibility that Paul here alludes to a broader story, namely the spread of wickedness and corruption throughout the created order. This enslaved-to-decay creation has been subjected to futility by God. Also to be noted, though, is the fact that, in the story of creation as he depicts it here, apart from saying that it was not something that creation itself willed, Paul gives no explicit attention to what preceded or

---

<sup>84</sup> Hahne, *Corruption and Redemption*, pp. 215-16. This raises the much wider issue of whether the NT's 'cosmic catastrophe' imagery is symbolic or metaphorical language depicting a radical transformation on the historical plane, as N.T. Wright argues (in Wright, *New Testament* pp. 280-6), or whether it envisages a truly cosmic and destructive event, as Edward Adams argues (Adams, *The Stars Will Fall*). Adams also suggests that there are two strands in NT eschatology in this regard, one emphasising the notion of cosmic destruction and re-creation, the other – notably represented in Rom. 8 – focused on the notion of transformation. Byrne, 'Creation Groaning', p. 202, suggests that Paul may avoid mentioning resurrection here precisely because 'he wishes to suggest a sense of continuity and transformation rather than destruction and rebirth'. Moo, on the other hand, sees 'the doctrine of the resurrection of the body' precisely as demanding 'a significant continuity of some kind between this world and the next. In fact, the analogy of the human body, as many interpreters have suggested, may offer the best way to resolve the tension between destruction and transformation with respect to the universe. Here also we find a puzzling combination of continuity and discontinuity' (Douglas J. Moo, 'Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment', *JETS* 49 [2006], pp. 449-88, at p. 469).

occasioned this subjection to futility. Rather, what Paul wants to emphasise here – a theme in keeping with the wider concerns of the chapter – is that creation was subjected *in hope*. In narrative terms, this means that the focus, from the subjection onwards, is entirely *forward*-looking; there is no description of the act of creation, no indication as to what (if anything) preceded its subjection to futility. The present – and forward-looking – existence of *kti/sij* is characterised by a co-groaning and a co-travail. Although this has reached a decisive eschatological moment, it is to be seen as the state of creation's existence since its subjection. Given the way Paul here also describes both the groaning of believers (v. 23) and the groaning with believers of the Spirit (v. 26), it seems most likely that he here depicts the creation as also bound up with humanity and the Spirit in a solidarity of shared groaning, and, similarly, a shared hope.

This hope, for creation, is focused on the moment of the revelation of the sons of God. It is these adopted children, the Christian believers with whom Paul shares his message of hope, who stand at the centre of this redemptive process. They await the redemption of their bodies, presumably a reference to their resurrection; and creation hopes – with a certainty that can match the confidence Paul urges on the Christians at Rome – to share in the freedom and glory that this redemption will bring.

In terms of the analysis of narrative and plot the central character in vv.19-22 is *kti/sij*, whose 'name' appears four times in these verses, and whose anticipated transformation from bondage to decay to freedom and glory is the central story. (This is not to deny, of course, that the *reason* Paul introduces this story here is to set the suffering and hope of the Christians at Rome into a wider context, to depict *their* groaning and their hope as part of a cosmic, and not merely local, drama.) In another sense, however, the sons/children of God are leading characters, since it is their liberation on which that of creation depends and onto which the hopes of creation are focused. In terms of the plot, these children of God are crucial for the progression of the story of creation from groaning to freedom. Yet the character most crucial to the progress of the plot is

also a character little evident in the explicit wording of the passage: God. We hear of God in this text only as the one to whom the sons/children belong (οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ, vv. 19, 21). But God's actions, hidden within the force of the so-called divine passives, are clearly the crucial motor of the entire plot, as encapsulated *in nuce* within two (passive) verbs: creation *was subjected... will be liberated*.

The story of creation, then, is a forward-looking story in which a tragic state is being transformed, with much suffering and struggle, into one of liberation. The reason for the tragic state is not given, nor are its causes analysed; the focus, rather, is on the divine action that leads both humans and non-human creation to freedom and glory.

Some of Paul's statements about the transformation of identity in Christ stress the 'already' of the typically Pauline now/not-yet (e.g., 2 Cor. 5:17), but generally it is clear that this is a process, decisively begun yet still to be worked out through suffering and struggle (e.g., Phil. 3:10-14; cf. also Col. 1:24). Romans 8 is a particularly developed and powerful depiction of this narrative, with its insistence that it is only in conformity to the sufferings of Christ that a sharing in his glory and inheritance is attained (8:17), a narrative in which vv. 19-23 so enigmatically include the whole of creation as co-groaning.

### **From narrative analysis to ecotheological interpretation**

What then are the gains and the possibilities of a narratively-focused analysis of Rom. 8:19-21? First, and most obviously, a narrative analysis helps to fill out something of the content of what Paul so briefly and allusively sketches, partly by finding further meaning and illumination in the wider (Jewish) thought-world that Paul inhabits. Secondly, a narrative analysis invites and permits comparison with other narratives and narrative types, ancient and modern, a move that is important in the context of a widespread conviction that narrative is a fundamental concept for understanding the ways in which our world-views and our actions are shaped. When capitalism, Marxism, medical science, and so on, are seen as differing narratives, giving their own particular (and contested) shape

and orientation to human living, the stage is set for Pauline thought (and Christian theology more generally) to offer its own perspective, as a different story about God, humanity and the world.<sup>85</sup> Thirdly, and specifically related to an ecotheological appropriation of this text, a narrative analysis emphasises that what we glimpse here is the ongoing *story* of creation, which is presently at a particular point in its development. A theological response to the environmental question should therefore take this 'point in the narrative' seriously, rather than simply discuss, say, a general notion of human responsibility for creation.

In terms of the narrative types outlined by Northrop Frye and developed theologically by James Hopewell, in his study of the different kinds of stories congregations tell, we suggest that in the Pauline story of struggle and suffering leading to glory there is more than a hint of a romantic (for Hopewell a 'charismatic') genre.<sup>86</sup> The 'heroes' of this sub-drama in God's great drama of salvation are 'the children of God' as they undertake their 'quest', longing to be transformed from one degree of glory to another, to come into that full liberty for which the creation as a whole also longs. In this they follow *the* central hero-figure, Christ himself, who, having faithfully accepted the path of suffering and death, has become the first-born among many siblings (8:29), the first-fruits from the dead (1 Cor. 15:20). As Jewett has argued, this Pauline narrative may represent a counter-cultural contrast to a received 'comic' narrative (in Frye's terms) of the Augustan Age, in which the crisis of the break-up of the Roman Republic is replaced by an (ultimately illusory) harmonious union of *urbs et orbs* in the person of the Emperor.<sup>87</sup>

### *Problems for an ecotheological appropriation of Rom. 8:19-23*

For those interested in contemporary ecotheology, and in the potential contribution of biblical texts to the construction of such a theology, the crucial

<sup>85</sup> See further Horrell, 'Paul's Narratives', pp. 168-71.

<sup>86</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000 [1957]); James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

<sup>87</sup> See Robert Jewett, 'The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Reading Rom 8:18-23 within the Imperial Context', in Richard A. Horsley (ed.) *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004), pp. 25-46; Jewett, *Romans*, pp. 508-517.

question, of course, is how (if at all) this Pauline narrative can inform and shape contemporary thinking. Careful analysis of Rom. 8:19-23 shows that it can do so far less easily or obviously than its status as a 'mantra for Christian environmentalism' would suggest. There are a number of specific aspects to draw attention to in this connection.

First, Paul's narrative here, as elsewhere, is fundamentally theocentric, in that the crucial motor of the entire plot, as we have noted, is the action of God. It is God, Paul implies, who has subjected the creation to futility. This is a motif elided by many ecological writers in their anxiety to profit from the notion of creation groaning in travail, but its presence here makes it harder to evoke the narrative as simply or unproblematically 'eco-friendly'. Moreover, the liberation which is anticipated is dependent on the action of God. There is no explicit statement in Romans 8 – considered by itself – that humans are expected to play any substantive role in 'liberating' *kti/sij*. The narrative in itself primarily encourages them to endure their suffering, a groaning in which the whole of creation shares, because of the certainty of God's final deliverance. Thus, any ethical mandate 'to work toward the goal of creation's final transformation', or even 'to be involved in working toward those ends that God will finally secure through his own sovereign intervention'<sup>88</sup> cannot simply be read directly from this text, but can only emerge from an imaginative and creative engagement with it, and with the wider resources of Pauline (and, more broadly, Christian) theology.

Second, the narrative is profoundly eschatological, and depicts the liberation of creation – like the resurrection of human beings – as something which lies beyond the present world, in which suffering and mortality are inescapable. A good deal of effort has gone into attempts to show that biblical eschatology does not envisage the (imminent) *destruction* or annihilation of the earth, but rather its *transformation*,<sup>89</sup> but even if this is convincing, the gain is much less than is

---

<sup>88</sup> Moo, 'Nature in the New Creation', at pp. 474, 484.

<sup>89</sup> E.g., Ernest Lucas, 'The New Testament Teaching on the Environment', *Transformation* 16 (1999), pp. 93-99; David M. Russell, *The "New Heavens and New Earth". Hope for the Creation in Jewish Apocalyptic and the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Visionary Press, 1996); Moo, 'Nature in the New Creation', pp. 449-88.

generally recognised. Even a transformed creation, no longer subject to physical suffering and death, is so radically different from the creation we inhabit, that it is not immediately clear how classic eco-friendly campaigns (such as recycling) might 'help' to reach that end.

Third, and implicit already in the problems sketched above, Paul's narrative is, of course, infused with ancient cosmological and mythological presuppositions that are radically different from those of the contemporary science that informs our understanding of the world.

All this, combined with the fact that Paul's text itself is, as we have noted, frustratingly brief and allusive, should greatly heighten our caution in appealing to Romans 8 as a sufficient or self-evident basis for Christian environmentalism. Indeed, we agree with Neil Messer when he writes that 'considerable reticence is in order as to the nature of this futility and the manner of this liberation'.<sup>90</sup>

*The theological contribution of Rom. 8:19-23: an ecotheological anthropocentrism?*

These sceptical remarks should not, however, be taken to indicate that we regard Romans 8 as of little value for ecotheology. On the contrary, the text is crucial for its focus on the fate of non-human creation and its linking of human redemption and creation's liberation. As we have seen, and as Brendan Byrne indicates in his essay on Romans 8 in the Earth Bible series, Rom. 8:19-23 does reflect a view of creation that affirms and supports some of what the Earth Bible Team set out as a series of ecojustice principles.<sup>91</sup> There is some sense of the intrinsic worth of creation, its inherent value, in this text; it is not merely the stage on which the drama of human salvation takes place. There is a strong sense of creation's 'purpose', its own eschatology, since its destiny is its participation in the glory and liberation of the children of God. These are important foundations

---

<sup>90</sup> Neil Messer, *Selfish Genes and Christian Ethics: Theological and Ethical Reflections on Evolutionary Biology* (London: SCM, 2007), p. 214.

<sup>91</sup> Byrne, 'Creation Groaning'. For discussion of the ecojustice principles, listed in each of the Earth Bible volumes, see The Earth Bible Team, 'Guiding Ecojustice Principles', in Norman C. Habel (ed.) *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 38-53.

for an ecological theology which, in the face of a heavily anthropocentric tradition,<sup>92</sup> seeks to develop and deepen a focus on the story of God's loving and saving relationship with the whole of creation. Even Paul's (in some ways difficult) theocentrism may help here, since it firmly resists – as Barth saw so well – any arrogant form of anthropocentrism. Yet, that said, it is hard to deny a certain anthropocentrism in Rom. 8:19-21, since the redemption of the sons of God stands at the centre of the story, as the focus for creation's hopes, an anthropocentrism more evident still when the passage is set within the wider context of Romans 8 as a whole. For some ecotheological writers, indeed, reacting in part against the perceived anthropocentrism of the theological tradition, this is a regrettable tendency which has to be removed from any adequate contemporary ecological theology. The writers in the Earth Bible Team, for example, reading through the lens of 'ecojustice principles' which include the 'intrinsic worth' of all things and the 'mutual custodianship' of Earth and its responsible inhabitants, tend to react with suspicion to any anthropocentrism in the biblical texts. Such a human-centred focus is to be resisted by those seeking a renewed ecological engagement with scripture by 'reading from the perspective of Earth'.<sup>93</sup> Does this then mean that the passage will remain problematic for ecotheology?<sup>94</sup>

It is worth at this point drawing on a distinction proposed by Lukas Vischer between anthropomonism and anthropocentrism.<sup>95</sup> The former is the view that it is only human beings who are of concern in the redeeming purposes of God;

---

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Byrne, 'Creation Groaning', p. 194, on the focus on the theme of justification (for sinful humans) by faith that has dominated interpretation of Romans. See also Bolt, 'Relation'.

<sup>93</sup> E.g. Keith Carley, 'Psalm 8: An Apology for Domination', in Norman C. Habel (ed.) *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 111-24; Earth Bible Team, 'Guiding Ecojustice Principles', pp. 44-6; Norman C. Habel, 'Geophany: The Earth Story in Genesis 1', in Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst (eds.) *The Earth Story in Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 34-48.

<sup>94</sup> Byrne, 'Creation Groaning', pp. 198-200, draws a distinction between 'negative' and 'positive' anthropocentrism.

<sup>95</sup> Lukas Vischer, 'Listening to Creation Groaning: a Survey of Main Themes of Creation Theology', in Lukas Vischer (ed.) *Listening to Creation Groaning: Report and Papers from a Consultation on Creation Theology organised by the European Christian Environmental Network at the John Knox International Reformed Center from March 28 to April 1st 2004* (Geneva: Centre International Reforme John Knox, 2004), pp. 11-31, at pp. 21-2.

human interests are exclusively important and creation exists only to serve those interests. The latter, by contrast, accepts that human beings are of central importance in the divine economy of salvation, but does not thereby imply that there is no value or eschatological purpose for the rest of creation. It may be that a chastened and humble anthropocentrism can appropriately remain key to an ecological theology, not only because, as Richard Bauckham points out, human beings evidently do, *de facto*, have 'unique power to affect most of the rest of creation on this planet',<sup>96</sup> but also because it is human beings whom we address and to whom we look for responsible action in relation to creation's future.

Romans 8 might indeed provide interesting resources for such an ecological anthropocentrism, since it depicts creation, humanity and the Spirit as conjoined in a chorus of hopeful groaning, and links creation's hope with that of humanity, and specifically that of the 'children of God'. The Christian believers are significant here, not because they represent the few who alone will be redeemed – an anthropomist and exclusivist doctrine of salvation – but because they are the ones in whom the promise of renewal and transformation is already coming to fruition: just as they have the firstfruits of the Spirit, so, in a sense, they are the firstfruits of a redeemed creation, the 'deposit' that guarantees the remainder (cf. 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5).

As Paul elsewhere makes clear, Christian living in the present has an eschatological quality to it; it is a call to be 'already' what is 'not yet' fully realised, to walk in the Spirit and so be transformed according to the pattern of the age to come.<sup>97</sup> Insofar as hope for the future thus informs present action, so too hope for creation might inform patterns of human living, such that the 'not yet' of

---

<sup>96</sup> Richard Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2002), at p. 173. Nonetheless, the extent of human power must be carefully expressed. Sometimes, as in Stephen Webb's recent comments, it is vastly overstated: 'The world is shrinking and humans are in charge of all of it, for better or worse. We cannot shirk our responsibility for nature. Nature is largely under our control. The only question is how we will exercise that control.' (Stephen H. Webb, *Good Eating* [Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos (Baker), 2001] p. 24). Floods and tsunamis, droughts and earthquakes, not to mention the broader picture of climate change, illustrate how little *control* we humans have over nature, however much our actions have impacted upon nature. An anthropocentric theology should not be an occasion for the expression of human arrogance.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. J. Paul Sampley, *Walking Between the Times: Paul's Moral Reasoning* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991).



creation's (and humanity's) liberation becomes evident in the 'already' of environmentally responsible living, not only for the sake of fellow human beings, who will suffer the effects of climate change, and so on, but also for the sake of the creation itself, and all the creatures which know suffering and decay.

But what immediately needs to be stressed is that there is – despite the many passing appeals to this text in ecotheological writing – no easy or obvious means to 'read-off' any contemporary ethical responsibilities or policies from Rom. 8:19-23, or indeed any other biblical text. All of the problems we have sketched above should together indicate that drawing on Romans 8 to outline an *ethical* response to our environmental challenges will require an imaginative, theologically and scientifically-informed engagement which goes well beyond what Paul himself might have envisaged.

#### *Towards an ethical engagement with Rom. 8:19-23*

The difficulties and challenges notwithstanding, the central stimulus of Rom. 8:19-23 is, we suggest, to consider what forms of human behaviour might appropriately reflect the story of liberation in which both humanity and creation are bound up. Indeed, the text invites exploration of the ethical dimensions and implications of the 'freedom' which those in Christ have proleptically and which the creation longs for, and therefore what part humans might play in the relief of creation's groaning.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, as suggested above, a narrative analysis implies that attention should be given to the *phase* in the story in which we are currently located. Appropriate Christian action will reflect our place in that shared story, and do so in ways that attempt to do justice both to the current 'co-groaning' of human and non-human creation and to the Pauline view of converted humanity as already reflecting the transformation that new creation in Christ represents. For Christians, as for Paul, this will remain a fundamentally theocentric narrative, yet this need not be taken to imply that the narrative can support no moral imperatives.

---

<sup>98</sup> Cf. N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), p. 258, on the responsibility that comes with 'glory'.

It is beyond the scope of this article to develop any of the possible routes of ethical engagement. And, it should again be stressed, these will be at least as dependent on contemporary theological and scientific thinking as they are on the content and stimulus of Romans 8.

One such possibility is represented by proponents of Christian vegetarianism, who argue that to cease to kill animals for food (and other purposes) is an appropriate sign of commitment to the eschatological vision of a peaceable and renewed creation.<sup>99</sup> Another possibility has been developed at length elsewhere by Christopher Southgate, who, while recognising that Paul could have had no inkling of contemporary evolutionary understandings, finds in the depiction of creation's 'groaning in travail', under God's subjection, a language that seems uncannily apt for a Darwinian understanding of the unfolding of creation. Richard W. Kropf and Holmes Rolston, III, have also made this identification between creation's groaning and the evolutionary process.<sup>100</sup> For Southgate, the inference from creation's expectation of the sharing in the glory and liberty of God's children is that human beings, who, in good Pauline manner, have already-but-not-yet come into their freedom in Christ, do indeed have a responsibility and a role in the healing of creation, in enabling creation too to participate in its destiny of glorious liberation — and, importantly, in ways which respect and reflect the conviction that this responsibility is exercised in the eschatological phase of the

---

<sup>99</sup> See e.g. Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (London: SCM, 1994), pp. 125-37; Webb, *Good Eating*, pp. 59-81. For more detailed consideration of these proposals, see Christopher Southgate, 'Protological and Eschatological Vegetarianism', in Rachel Muers and David Grumett (eds.) *Eating and Believing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vegetarianism and Theology* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2008) forthcoming, and David G. Horrell, 'Biblical Vegetarianism? A Critical and Constructive Assessment', in Rachel Muers and David Grumett (eds.) *Eating and Believing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vegetarianism and Theology* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2008) forthcoming.

<sup>100</sup> Richard W. Kropf, *Evil and Evolution: A Theodicy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004 [1984]), sees the futility as residing in the operation of chance in the evolutionary process (p. 124). For Rolston: "'Groaning in travail" is in the nature of things from time immemorial. Such travail is the Creator's will, productive as it is of glory.' (Holmes Rolston, III, 'Naturalizing and Systematizing Evil', in Willem B. Drees [ed.] *Is Nature ever Evil?* [London and New York: Routledge, 2003], pp. 67-86, at p. 85.) Southgate's approach differs from these in not merely celebrating this ambiguous process, but seeing a possibility that humans could have some part in its healing. See Christopher Southgate, 'God and Evolutionary Evil: Theodicy in the Light of Darwinism', *Zygon* 37 (2002), pp. 803-24, at pp. 819-20.

story of *kṭi/sij*, the phase of straining forward to what lies ahead.<sup>101</sup> In other words, there is no denial here that the end of the process lies beyond this phase of struggle, and is ultimately dependent on the saving action of God. One of Southgate's concrete proposals, developed through an extended dialogue with the findings of evolutionary science, is that humans could have a role in bringing to an end biological extinction, that great driver of the evolutionary process.<sup>102</sup> The 'futility' of creation, on this view, is that individual creatures are destined for lives often full of struggle and suffering, and that species themselves have a finite life-span. This is struggle and extinction through which other values have been enhanced in the biosphere. In Holmes Rolston's resonant phrase, 'the cougar's fang has carved the limbs of the fleet-footed deer'.<sup>103</sup> But in the eschatological phase of the *kṭi/sij*, humans can be part of the healing of this process, such that species are protected (by the activity of regenerate human society) and not driven into extinction by the flourishing of other creatures.<sup>104</sup> One thing this proposal notably reflects, and which a narrative analysis of Rom. 8:19-21 specifically suggests, is the idea that we stand at a *particular* point in the story of God's redeeming and liberating project, and that Christian ethics must base itself on that (eschatological) conviction.

### *Conclusion*

Our investigation and analysis of Rom. 8:19-21 has, we hope, served both a critical and a constructive function. Careful engagement with this text, and elucidation of the narrative of creation it reflects, shows that, despite frequent appeals based on precisely this assumption, it cannot in any straightforward way be taken as a Christian endorsement of the imperatives of environmentalism. It does have an important contribution to make, but any theological or ethical appropriation requires much work beyond the elucidation of the meaning of the

---

<sup>101</sup> Cf. Rom. 8:19 and Phil. 3:13.

<sup>102</sup> See Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008) whose work is the main source for these closing reflections on appropriating Romans 8.

<sup>103</sup> Holmes Rolston, III, *Science and Religion: A Critical Survey* (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 134.

<sup>104</sup> See Southgate, *Groaning of creation*, ch. 7.

text – despite the implicit (or even explicit) claim in some quarters that to have done biblical exegesis is, in effect, to have done systematic theology.<sup>105</sup> Whether Southgate’s proposals are found compelling or not – and we have here been able only to give the briefest outline of their substance – his work illustrates the engagement with science and theology that is necessary before Paul’s enigmatic text, and the narrative of God, humanity and creation which it reflects, can make any meaningful connections with contemporary ecological questions. In the field of ecotheology in particular, with the massively important contribution of science to our understanding, to have done the exegesis is only just to have begun.

Cherryl Hunt, David G. Horrell, Christopher Southgate

University of Exeter, UK

i.c.hunt@exeter.ac.uk; d.g.horrell@exeter.ac.uk; c.c.b.southgate@exeter.ac.uk

---

<sup>105</sup> See, for example, Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: IVP, 1994): ‘*Systematic theology is any study that answers the question, “What does the whole Bible teach us today?” about any given topic...* systematic theology involves collecting and understanding all the relevant passages in the Bible on various topics and then summarising their teachings clearly so that we know what to believe’ (p. 21, italics original). Grudem draws a distinction between systematic theology and Christian ethics, but envisages a similar approach for the latter task too (cf. p. 26). Cf. also pp. 127-35 on the sufficiency of scripture. It is also striking that, among the major doctrines Grudem presents, the doctrine of creation does not find a place, though there is a section on ‘the creation of man’ within ‘the doctrine of man’ and a brief consideration of the ‘new creation’ within ‘the doctrine of the future’.